Early Syriac Christianity has always been a fascinating subject of both scholarly and non-scholarly research due to its traditions which were written in an Aramaic dialect closely related to the Palestinian Aramaic of Jesus' times. At first sight, the Syriac traditions seem dissimilar to the written heritage of Greek speaking Christianity of the first centuries C.E., not to mention the Latin-speaking church in the west. Yet on closer investigation, this is shown not to be so, since Syriac Christianity shared a common heritage with the Greek expression. The history of the Syriac branch of the early church, which has been termed "a third cultural tradition" is still basically unwritten, although a number of books and articles exist, all of fairly recent date, covering different aspects of the field and propagating widely divergent views. It is not, and cannot be, the purpose of this review article to fill that hiatus. Rather it will discuss some recent publications in this field, attempt to formulate the central questions, and sketch the possible outlines of Early Syriac Christianity in its historical and cultural context.

The approach of Andreas Feldtkeller, Identitätssuche des syrischen Urchristentums. Mission, Inkulturation und Pluralität im ältesten Heidenchristentum (Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus 25, Freiburg-Göttingen 1993) to this complicated field of study is basically theological and not historical. The author, a Lutheran minister at Amman, has as his main concern the preaching of the Christian message in a Muslim milieu and society mindful of what the two religions have in common. He is convinced that Christian belief and religious practice in a Muslim environment will turn out differently from Christian belief and identity in another cultural milieu. Christianity in the Syrian region, of which present-day Amman is part, during the first two centuries of our era presents an analogous situation. The mission among pagans, of which Antioch was the centre, brought Christianity into contact with the various syncretistic hellenistic religions of antique Syria and produced a multiform Christianity. Christian pluralism of the early cen-
turies mirrors the pluralism of Syrian religion and culture, since mission always calls for a process of adaptation to existing religious patterns. Conversion to Christianity was and is never a complete break with the past, but an adaptation of previous existing belief systems and practices to a “new” religion (Feldtkeller, pp. 57f.). Feldtkeller, detecting these various approaches to pagan religions already in the New Testament gospels and in St Paul’s letters, restricts himself mainly to these sources. His book consequently is a theological study as well as a painstaking monograph on certain New Testament passages.

Feldtkeller does not provide his readers with detailed information about the pagan cults in Syria, nor with the history of Christian mission in this area for which the seminal study is still A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (2te Aufl. Leipzig 1906). Second century developments and sources are hardly mentioned by Feldtkeller and when this is the case, the information is rather insufficient. The passage on the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* on p. 163 is exemplary of this deficiency. Tatian who had a substantial influence on early Christianity in the Syrian area is only mentioned once (p. 158f.) and Feldtkeller’s only source of information is A. Vööbus, *A History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* I (Louvain 1958), which basically is a very poor English translation of St. Schiwietz, *Das morgenländische Mönchtum*, 3 Vols, (Mainz 1904, 1913, Mödling bei Wien 1938). It is moreover highly dubious, and at least much debated, whether ascetic practices in Syria are a development of the so-called *Wanderradikalismus* of Jesus’ followers in Palestine, as Feldtkeller maintains. (p. 157)

The title of this book engenders associations with the German translation by E. Preuschen of F.C. Burkitt’s work on early Christianity in Syria, *Urchristentum im Orient* (Tübingen 1907), but the two books have only the term *Urchristentum* in common. One also looks in vain for a discussion of W. Bauer, *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (BHTh 10, Tübingen 1934; 2te Aufl. hrsg v. G. Strecker, 1964) which work actually deals with the very same problem that Feldtkeller writes about, the meaning and origin of pluralism in early Christianity. It is astonishing that Bauer’s book is not even recorded in the bibliography !! One easily agrees with Feldtkeller’s main thesis that the pluralism of the early history of Christianity, actually the different ways in which Jesus’ message was understood and practised, is related to the different historical situations in which this message was preached.